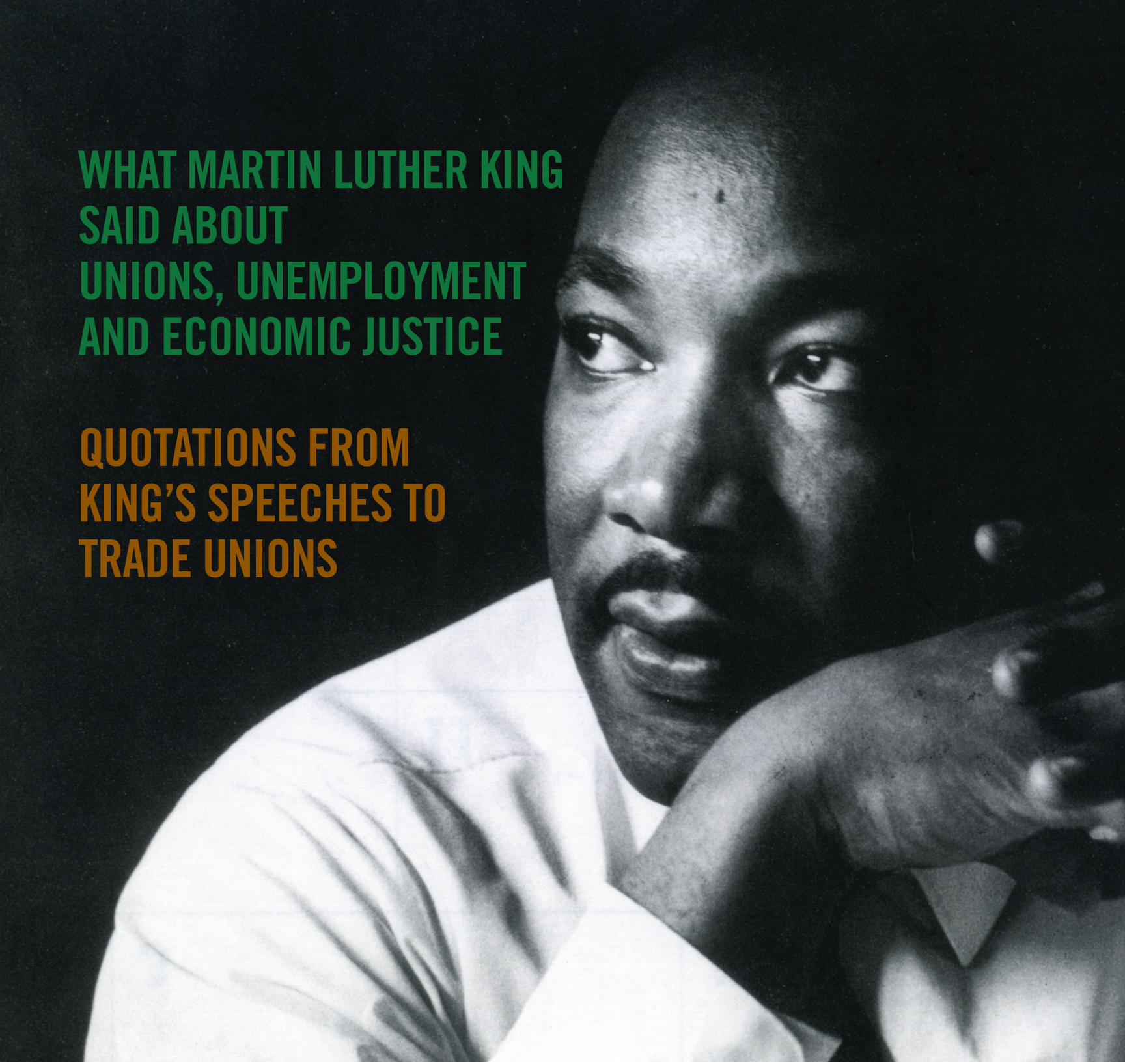


WHAT MARTIN LUTHER KING SAID ABOUT UNIONS, UNEMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

QUOTATIONS FROM KING'S SPEECHES TO TRADE UNIONS

THE MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. CENTER FOR NONVIOLENT SOCIAL CHANGE

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THE VALUE OF UNIONS

THE LABOR MOVEMENT WAS THE PRINCIPAL FORCE that transformed misery and despair into hope and progress. Out of its bold struggles, economic and social reform gave birth to unemployment insurance, old-age pensions, government relief for the destitute, and, above all, new wage levels that meant not mere survival but a tolerable life. The captains of industry did not lead this transformation; they resisted it until they were overcome. When in the thirties the wave of union organization crested over the nation, it carried to secure shores not only itself but the whole society.

Civilization began to grow in the economic life of man, and a decent life with a sense of security and dignity became a reality rather than a distant dream.

It is a mark of our intellectual backwardness that these monumental achievements of labor are still only dimly seen, and in all too many circles the term "union" is still synonymous with self-seeking, power hunger, racketeering, and cynical coercion. There have been and still are wrongs in the trade union movement, but its share of credit for triumphant accomplishments is substantially denied in the historical treatment of the nation's progress.

Speech given to the Illinois State AFL-CIO
SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS, OCT. 7, 1965

BECAUSE YOU PERSISTED IN YOUR QUEST FOR A BETTER LIFE, you brought new horizons to the whole nation. Industry after industry was compelled to civilize its practices and in so doing benefited themselves along with you. The new unions became social institutions, which stabilized the nation, fortified it, and thrust it up to undreamed of levels of production.

Speech given to the United Automobile Workers Union
DETROIT, MICHIGAN, APRIL 27, 1961

THE COMMON INTERESTS OF UNIONS AND AFRICAN AMERICANS

OUR NEEDS ARE IDENTICAL WITH LABOR'S NEEDS: decent wages, fair working conditions, livable housing, old-age security, health and welfare measures, conditions in which families can grow, have education for their children, and respect in the community. That is why Negroes support labor's demands and fight laws which curb labor. That is why the labor-hater and labor-baiter is virtually always a twin-headed creature spewing anti-Negro epithets from one mouth and antilabor propaganda from the other mouth.

The duality of interests of labor and Negroes makes any crisis which lacerates you, a crisis from which we bleed. And as we stand on the threshold of the second half of the twentieth century, a crisis confronts us both. Those who in the second half of the nineteenth century could not tolerate organized labor have had a rebirth of power and seek to regain the despotism of that era while retaining the wealth and privileges of the twentieth century.

Speech given to the AFL-CIO Fourth Constitutional Convention
MIAMI BEACH, FLORIDA, DEC. II, 1961

THE DUALITY OF INTERESTS OF LABOR AND NEGROES MAKES ANY CRISIS WHICH LACERATES YOU, A CRISIS FROM WHICH WE BLEED.



THE COMBINED STRENGTH OF UNIONS AND AFRICAN AMERICANS

THE TWO MOST DYNAMIC MOVEMENTS that reshaped the nation during the past three decades are the labor and civil rights movements. Our combined strength is potentially enormous. We have not used a fraction of it for our own good or for the needs of society as a whole. If we make the war on poverty a total war; if we seek higher standards for all workers for an enriched life, we have the ability to accomplish it, and our nation has the ability to provide it. If our two movements unite their social pioneering initiative, thirty years from now people will look back on this day and honor those who had the vision to see the full possibilities of modern society and the courage to fight for their realization. On that day, the brotherhood of man, undergirded by economic security, will be a thrilling and creative reality.

Speech given to the Illinois State AFL-CIO
SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS, OCT. 7, 1965

THE VITAL IMPORTANCE OF UNION RECOGNITION

WHEN I TRY TO LOOK WITH PERSPECTIVE at the real historical picture of the last decade I find that I am helped by the experience of labor when it first embarked on mass organization in the 1930s.

...strikes meant long weeks and months of intense hunger, conflict, and physical violence, a press and public opinion that depicted the strike as an insurrection. With the settlement of many of these early strikes there was little or nothing added to the pay envelope, little or nothing for job security, and a mountain of debts to pay and harsh memories to forget.

Yet there was one thing that was won—one thing that was fought for as indispensable, one thing for which all the pain and sacrifice was justified: namely, union recognition. It seemed so minuscule a victory that people outside the labor movement scorned it as, in fact, just another defeat. But to those who understood, union recognition meant the real beginning. Union meant strength, and recognition meant the employer's acknowledgment of that strength, and the two meant the opportunity to fight again for further gains with united and multiplied power. As contract followed contract, the pay envelope fattened and fringe benefits and job rights grew to the mature work standards of today. All of these started with winning first union recognition.

Speech given to the shop stewards of Local 815, Teamsters, and the Allied Trades Council
NEW YORK CITY, MAY 2, 1967

BUT TO THOSE WHO UNDERSTOOD, UNION RECOGNITION MEANT THE REAL BEGINNING.

THE CRISIS OF UNEMPLOYMENT AND LOW-WAGE JOBS

WHAT KIND OF SECURITY DO WE HAVE WHEN JOBS CAN DISAPPEAR for periods and families must abruptly sink to lower living standards? Why should older workers be put in competition with younger workers; why should Negro workers and white workers compete for jobs?

Where are the unemployed automation has created? Many, numbering millions, are walking the streets. A large proportion are Negroes who are half hidden in the ghettos. Some have found employment in service industries in low-paid jobs largely unprotected by unions in these unorganized trades. Other millions have retired, some on pensions, some on Social Security, others on relief.

The tragic and perilous feature common to all is that they have moved from a decent standard of living to an essentially impoverished condition. This process is dangerous for the nation as it reduces purchasing power; it is dangerous for labor as it undermines standards; and it is catastrophic for the Negro who does not even have a toehold on security.

Speech given to the Illinois State AFL-CIO, SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS, OCT. 7, 1965

BUT THE PROBLEM IS NOT ONLY UNEMPLOYMENT. It's under- or sub-employment. People who work full-time jobs for part-time wages. Most of the poor people in our country are working every day, but they're making wages so inadequate that they cannot even begin to function in the mainstream of the economic life of the nation.

We look around and we see thousands and millions of people making inadequate wages every day. Not only do they work in our hospitals, they work in our hotels, they work in our laundries, they work in domestic service, and they find themselves underemployed.

Speech given to Local 1199, NEW YORK CITY, MARCH 10, 1968

THE PROBLEM AMERICA MUST CONFRONT: PREVENTING PROGRESS FROM CREATING UNEMPLOYMENT

AUTO WORKERS ARE FACING HARD-CORE UNEMPLOYMENT. New economic patterning through automation and relocation of plants is dissolving the nation's basic industries. This is to me a catastrophe. We are neither technologically advanced nor socially enlightened as a nation if we witness this disaster for tens of thousands without finding a solution. And by a solution I mean a real and genuine alternative providing the same living standards and opportunities which were swept away by a force called progress, but which for many is destruction.

A society that performs miracles with machinery has the capacity to make some miracles for men if it values men as highly as it values machines. This is really the crux of the problem.

…WHEN HUMAN VALUES ARE SUBORDINATED TO BLIND ECONOMIC FORCES, HUMAN BEINGS CAN BECOME HUMAN SCRAP.

Are we as concerned for human values and human resources as we are for material and mechanical values? The automobile industry is not alone a production complex of assembly lines and steel-forming equipment. It is an industry of people who must live in decency with the security for children, for old age, for health and cultural life. Automation cannot be permitted to become a blind monster which grinds out more cars and simultaneously snuffs out the hopes and lives of the people by whom the industry was built....

...when human values are subordinated to blind economic forces, human beings can become human scrap.

Speech given to the United Automobile Workers Union
DETROIT, MICHIGAN, April 27, 1961



MARTIN LUTHER KING'S 'DREAM'— ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR ALL

THIS WILL BE THE DAY WHEN WE SHALL BRING INTO FULL REALIZATION THE DREAM OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY—a dream yet unfulfilled. A dream of equality of opportunity, of privilege and property widely distributed; a dream of a land where men will not take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few....

Speech given to the AFL-CIO Fourth Constitutional Convention
MIAMI BEACH, FLORIDA, DEC. II, 1961

...A DREAM OF A LAND WHERE MEN WILL NOT TAKE NECESSITIES FROM THE MANY TO GIVE LUXURIES TO THE FEW....

I DON'T THINK THE ANSWER IS IN COMMUNISM. Communism is based in ethical relativism, a metaphysical materialism, a denial of human freedom, and a totalitarianism that I can never accept. I believe that we can work within the framework of our democracy to make for a better distribution of wealth, and I believe that God has left enough and to spare in this world for all of his children to have the basic necessities of life. I will never be satisfied, and I will never be content, until all men and all women can have the basic necessities of life.

Speech given to the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) District 65
MONTICELLO, NEW YORK, SEPT. 8, 1962

"LIKE MY FATHER, I BELIEVE THAT WORKING PEOPLE OF ALL RACES SHARE A VISION. IT IS A VISION OF DECENT WAGES AND WORKING CONDITIONS, A VISION OF MULTIRACIAL UNITY AND MUTUAL PROGRESS, A VISION OF HOPE AND OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL. IT IS A VISION THAT THE AMERICAN LABOR MOVEMENT AND PEOPLE OF COLOR HAVE SHARED FOR GENERATIONS, AND IT IS THE BASIS FOR A NEW COALITION OF CONSCIENCE THAT WILL TURN THE STRUGGLES OF TODAY INTO THE TRIUMPHS OF TOMORROW."

MARTIN LUTHER KING III

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